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SIPDIS

LONDON FOR GOLDRICH, PARIS FOR O'FRIEL

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKISH HEAD SCARF DEBATE: "THE TURBAN IS A MORAL ISSUE"

(U) Classified by Political Counselor John Kunstadter.
Reason: 1.5(b)(d).

1. (C) Summary: As Turkey watchers speculate about newly-elected Justice and Development (AK) Party leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan's political priorities, university professor Huseyn Bagci, an academic advisor to Erdogan, shared his views on a variety of issues. Bagci affirmed "The turban (head scarf) is a moral issue. It will be dealt with at the right time." Bagci's views more nearly parallel those of the average Turk, rather than those of other academics and writers and reflect what we have heard from within AK regarding the timing of its agenda. End summary.

2. (C) As part of a round of post-election discussions with Turkish academics, Poloff called on Middle East Technical University international relations professor Dr. Huseyn Bagci December 3. Bagci, who earned his Ph.D. from Bonn University in 1988 when he was 29 years old, specializes in Turkish-European, particularly French and German, relations and often provides international political commentary for Turkish print and electronic media. Very much the senior academic running a graduate-level seminar, Bagci shared his views on a variety of contemporary issues with Poloff:

-- on Afghanistan: "Turkey has a cultural and historical obligation to take care of the people of Afghanistan."

-- on imperialism: "France, Britain and Germany were great imperial powers. Britain's imperialism has left us with four major problems today: Ireland, Kashmir, Turkey and Greece, and Israel and Palestine."

-- on Iraq: "No Turkish sultan would have stopped at the borders of Kuwait (as the U.S. did during the Gulf War). He would have gone directly to Baghdad and gotten Saddam. Turkish history is filled with pashas (generals) such as Mehmet Ali, who ignored commands from sultans. The U.S. is a second-tier imperialist for not having gone after Saddam."

-- on Turkey's elections; In contrast to other academics Poloff has canvassed, asked whether he falls into the category that thinks Erdogan (AK Party) was elected because Turkish voters really like his program or the group that thinks Erdogan won because large numbers stayed away from the polls, Bagci responded easily, "the former group." He considers Erdogan a charismatic leader whose visits with European leaders resulted in his passing his first test with flying colors. Again in contrast to other academics, Bagci's opinions about Turkish politics and the elections more nearly parallel those held by the average Turk.

-- on whether he is a friend of Erdogan's: Bagci responded no, but asserted that he is a "close advisor." Erdogan knows him and follows his advice, he averred.

-- and most important, the turban (Islamist head scarf): Bagci replied that it is a "moral issue. The question is when is it appropriate to defend a moral issue?" Answering his own question, Bagci stated, "It will happen when the time is right, just as the fruit of a tree should not be picked before it is fully ripe." Bagci is the first academic Poloff has talked to who acknowledges the moral aspect to the turban issue and who believes it will be dealt with once other important issues, such as the economy and admission to the European Union are resolved.

3. (C) Comment: Academics and columnists have speculated about the implications, symbolism and appropriateness of turban-wearing wives and staffers of senior officials, such as Prime Minister Abdullah Gul. While Bagci is the only academic we know who has described the turban as a "moral

issue," his observations are important because they openly affirm what the average Turk is saying, which is very different from what has been offered so far by other academics and intellectuals. His observations on the timing of AK Party's moves to overcome the ban on wearing of head scarves tracks with what we hear from AK Party headquarters. End Comment.
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